THE DRAMA OF REVOLT

A CRITICAL STUDY OF GEORG BÜCHNER

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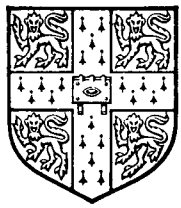

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1. INTRODUCTION

Many of the world's finest artists, including even some of the great tragic dramatists – Sophocles, Shakespeare, Racine – seem to set out from a position of acquiescence in the spirit of their times, from an acceptance of the institutions, customs and beliefs of their society. They are content at first to express themselves in the established artistic forms of their age, and the innovations they effect, whether in ideas or in artistic techniques, emerge gradually in the course of an organic development. But there are others who are rebels from the beginning, who are antagonized from the very outset by what they feel to be false, cruel or absurd in society, art, religion, the whole condition of mankind. Georg Büchner is one of the most distinguished of these artists in revolt. He is a rebel, first of all, in a political sense, for a brief but significant period deeply and dangerously involved in a conspiracy to overthrow the government of his country. But he is equally a rebel in all the other spheres of his activity, in his philosophical speculations, in his aesthetic theories, in his practice as a dramatist.[1]

This does not mean that his work is purely negative and destructive. Revolt implies positive values which the rebel seeks to vindicate even if he is not fully conscious of them, even if he only becomes aware of them in the moment of their violation. And Büchner's many-sided activity will accordingly be found to have its positive as well as its negative aspects. In each of its spheres that activity conforms broadly to the same pattern: falsehood is rejected for the sake of truth, evil for the sake of good. But the truth and good upheld are not independent of the falsehood and evil combated but are to some extent conditioned by these. And the initial movement of thought and action is negative rather than positive: there is a much more immediate awareness of what must be rejected than of what might possibly be accepted.

A brief comparison with Hölderlin may help to clarify Büchner's attitude. In a sense Hölderlin too was a rebel. We know how strongly he sympathized with the French Revolution; and two

of his major works, *Hyperion* and *Empedokles*, are centrally concerned with revolution and revolt, the former with the revolt of the Greeks against the Turks, the latter with the revolutionary renewal of the city-state of Agrigentum. But Hölderlin, as befits a hymnic poet, is essentially a poet of praise ('Beruf ist mirs, zu rühmen Höhers').[2] His whole life and thought are governed by a vision of ideal beauty, and his poetry dwells long and lovingly on that vision. In his elegiac poetry he is concerned to keep alive the memory of it, in his hymnic poetry to prophesy its recurrence. If he can fall into despair it is because he sometimes loses sight of it. If he is moved to revolt it is because the reality of his time negates it. But always that highly positive vision remains the beginning and end of his aspirations. With Büchner it is quite otherwise. Büchner never lets his thoughts dwell on an ideal vision. It is characteristic of him to set out from a repellent reality and only with difficulty, fitfully and imperfectly, to descry the beauty that may possibly emerge from it. His deepest experience is not the enthusiasm for beauty but the pitying insight into suffering. He is not a poet of praise but a poet of revolt.

Evidently both attitudes have their positive and negative aspects; but in the one the positive give rise to the negative, in the other the negative to the positive. And this difference involves characteristic differences of emphasis, of approach, of style and tone.

Of the two attitudes it is no doubt Büchner's rather than Hölderlin's that is most in accordance with twentieth-century habits of thought; and this may well be one of the reasons for the intense interest which Büchner continues to excite and the immense influence he has had upon contemporary drama. It is true that Albert Camus, the writer of the twentieth century who has most earnestly and methodically studied the phenomenon of metaphysical, political and aesthetic revolt, begins his *L'Homme révolté* with a quotation from Hölderlin and makes no mention whatever of Büchner. Camus had indeed much in common with Hölderlin: the striving for measure and moderation, the sense of loyalty to the earth, the enthusiasm for Greece, 'la pensée

solaire'. But Camus's thought is nevertheless more deeply akin to Büchner's than to Hölderlin's. Both in *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* and in *L'Homme révolté* Camus sets out from the experience of the absurdity, cruelty and injustice of the world and seeks to arrive at positive values by an analysis of the revolt which that experience may excite or imply.[3] His analysis will provide us with a number of useful insights in the following study of Büchner's revolt. But there will be no need to accept all of Camus's theses nor to make Büchner conform to any preconceived pattern. It must be our task simply to investigate the phenomenon of revolt as we find it in Büchner's life and work, to pursue the investigation freely wherever it may lead, and to see how far it will take us in the interpretation of his plays.